

international cooperation

The National Blindness Survey in Pakistan is an excellent example of public-private partnership in which the following national and international organisations collaborated with the Federal Ministry of Health and Provincial Health Departments:

National Organisations

*Pakistan Institute of Community Ophthalmology
(PICO) in Peshawar*

*Punjab Institute of Preventive Ophthalmology
(PIPO) in Lahore*

*Prevention and Control of Blindness Cell, Civil
Hospital, in Karachi*

Helpers Eye Hospital in Quetta

International Organisations

World Health Organization

Sight Savers International (UK)

International Centre for Eye Health (UK)

Christoffel Blinden Mission (Germany)

Fred Hollows Foundation (Australia)



Jamshyd Masud/Sight Savers

The Murad family, who live in the slums of Karachi, were devastated when not one but three of their children went blind from cataract, knowing that they couldn't afford the simple treatment that would restore their children's sight. Farzana, 17; Shahbaz, 14; and Rehana, 11, were born with congenital cataracts, and their sight gradually worsened over the years.

In early June the family visited the eye clinic at a hospital in Karachi, which provides free treatment for people who cannot afford it. All three children were diagnosed with bilateral cataracts, and had surgery on their right eyes to replace the cloudy lens with a clear plastic one, and then a month later on their left eyes.

The children are now back at school and doing well. The three are ambitious, and have plans for the future after cataract surgery changed their lives. Farzana wants to become a teacher, while the other two hope to pursue a career in medicine.

conclusion

Blindness is one of the major disabilities prevalent in Pakistan and has profound physical, social and economic implications. It reduces the educational opportunities of children and employment options for adults and thereby increases the likelihood of poverty.

The results of this survey will form the basis for planning strategies and interventions to prevent and control blindness in Pakistan.

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Jamshyd Masud / Sight Savers

seeing into the future

Blindness in Pakistan

introduction



Blindness is one of the five major disabilities. The government of Pakistan has recognised that the prevention and support of disability can play a significant role in reducing poverty and has recently formulated a new policy on disability, the cornerstone of which is the inclusion of all people in society. In addition in August 2005 the government plans to launch a national programme for prevention and control of blindness.

For a developing country like Pakistan, with a population of over 150 million people, providing services for different disabilities poses major challenges. The distribution of facilities and availability of trained human resources is not always uniform and often concentrated in urban areas. For policy makers and health planners, one of the essential pieces of information that is required is how many people are affected by the condition and where are they likely to be found.

In 2002–2004, the Ministry of Health commissioned a national survey to determine the prevalence, magnitude and causes of blindness in the country with the aim of planning for the prevention and control of blindness. This government initiative in evidence based planning supports the World Health Assembly (WHA) resolution on the elimination of avoidable blindness passed in May 2003. The resolution commits member countries to develop national VISION 2020 plans in an effort to achieve the elimination of avoidable blindness by the year 2020.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that globally, every second an adult goes blind and a child becomes blind every minute. The Ministry of Health in Pakistan has constituted a National Committee for Prevention of Blindness. This group has been tasked to prepare a national Plan of Action for Prevention and Control of Blindness as part of the government's obligations to meet its national and international commitments and has allocated Rupees 2.7 Billion for the National Programme for the period 2005–2010.

the survey

The results published here represent the preliminary findings of the Pakistan National Blindness Survey. This study is a very important piece of work in the country's continuing efforts to eliminate avoidable blindness. As the largest survey of its kind worldwide, this study also has important implications and learning for other countries. The study means that Pakistan is one of the few countries to have national data on blindness and low vision which is crucial for good health planning and policy.

The full results of the study will be presented in November 2005 and will provide an important way forward for the government of Pakistan in its endeavours to develop prevention and control strategies.

study design

Based on standard criteria established by WHO, 221 randomly selected rural and urban areas in Pakistan were surveyed by three skilled teams including ophthalmologists, nurses and technicians who between them examined a total of 16,000 adults and 6,000 children.

The survey revealed a national prevalence of blindness of 1% which means that at least 1.5 million Pakistanis are blind in both eyes. Two thirds of these people are women.

The survey also revealed that the situation varies from province to province. Figure 1 shows the magnitude of blindness by province.

Key:



causes of blindness

The main causes of blindness were found to be:

- cataract (a clouding of the lens in the eye) **53%**
- scarring of the cornea (clear part of the eye) **14%**
- glaucoma (the nerve of the eye is affected by pressure in the eyeball) **7%**
- refractive errors (need for spectacles) **3%**
- macular degeneration (a disease of ageing that affects the light sensitive part of the eye) **2%**

All these blinding diseases can either be avoided (i.e. they are either preventable or treatable) or can be helped with optical devices (spectacles or low vision aids).

